

Testimony of Susan Salters

Regarding H.B. No. 5037 (COMM) AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2023

APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE 2/23/2022

INCREASE FUNDING FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING CENTERS BY \$1 MILLION DOLLARS Governor's Proposed FY 23 Budget Adjustments

Good evening, Co-Chairs; Senator Catherine A. Osten and Representative Toni E. Walker, members of the Appropriation Committee and concerned citizens

I am an advocate at Independence Unlimited, one of five Centers for Independent Living within Connecticut and I have been in this position for nearly 15 years. I came to this work because I wanted to help people like my son who was born with a disability. I reside in Manchester, CT and Jeff Currey is my State Representative in the 11th District.

As an advocate I take several phone calls daily from people with disabilities living in our communities who need assistance with everything from obtaining the correct documentation to be able to apply for an apartment to stepping in when someone's healthcare coverage has been dropped or food stamps discontinued. During this pandemic we were able to get groceries to people who were immunocompromised where it was dangerous for them to go shopping, to obtain computers or phones so people with disabilities could keep in touch with loved ones and to help them get the much-needed vaccines. When we say we help people with disabilities live independently it means helping people who are living tenuously day to day relying on DSS for their basic needs, praying they can find or keep a roof over their heads and that they can find a doctor that takes their insurance.

But being an advocate is only one hat that I wear, I also try to make Connecticut residents aware of much needed systemic changes that will directly affect the lives of people with disabilities and their ability to stay living in the community. I facilitate a Visitability Home Design Contest for high school and college students in Connecticut to design homes where everyone, no matter their disability, can find a home. Imagine driving by every new housing development or apartment complex and know you are shut out of that housing because there are only steps to the front door. Before the pandemic, I went into people's homes and evaluated, for the homeowner, if that home could be made accessible enough for their family to Age In Place and keep them from having to go into a nursing facility. Right now, I am involved in the fight to get all healthcare facilities in Connecticut to be made accessible to people with mobility impairments. Over and over, I hear of folks who have to be examined in their

wheelchairs because the doctor doesn't have a table that is adjustable, so their health can't properly be evaluated. These are life's opportunities that we take for granted.

Over the years, there have been many stories, some we were able to help and some not. One of my stories is of an older man who came to our office several years ago. "I am homeless," he said, "I'm living in my car." Sometimes he would find a place to live when someone put him up but he ended up not being able to stay for long. For years, summer and winter his home had 4 wheels. When the state started the Continuum of Care program to end homelessness, I jumped in to help him obtain this much needed support. It took a long time to put together the evidence the program required but he made it and no longer has to try to survive Connecticut winters staying warm in a sleeping bag. This is how the Centers for Independent Living have advocates in the trenches making a difference in the lives of individuals each and every day.

We do our part but we can't do it alone. One in five residents in Connecticut have identified as living with a disability. Since I've been employed at IU, we went from covering all 169 towns in Connecticut with a budget of \$641,948 to narrowing the size of our service areas, reducing staff and limiting the types of services we can provide because of the increasing number and needs of people in our state with disabilities as well as deep budget cuts over the past several years. Our neighbors, New York and Massachusetts fund their Centers for Independent Living at \$335,000 for each center and \$645,000 each center, respectively. Don't Connecticut residents with disabilities deserve the same level of services as other states? Please consider increasing the budget line item for the Centers for Independent Living to \$1.75 million so we can put back the services that our most vulnerable citizens need to keep going as independent, sometimes working, tax paying and voting members of our communities.

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